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## Introduction to *Home: An exploratory journey with young Somali-Australians*

Caitlin Nunn

**Overview:** As the first generation of young people growing up in an emerging immigrant community, the Somali-Australians who passed through adolescence in the first decade of this century were pioneers. Forging their own paths through the spatial, socio-cultural and emotional terrain of Somalia(n) and Australia(n), they created new cartographies of home. *Home: an exploratory journey with young Somali-Australians* both reflects and constitutes this process. Emerging out of a collaboration between researchers, artists, and Somali-background youth, *Home* is an audio-visual work that integrates documentary, acted scenes, interviews and photographs to chart the complexity and dynamism of producing and inhabiting home. The outcome is a polyvocal and multisensory map that takes the viewer into the homes of young Somali-Australians.

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(Editor's note: the accompanying film is located on the *Liminalities* website at <http://liminalities.net/12-1/home.html>)

**Introduction to *Home: An exploratory journey with young Somali-Australians***

For the first generation of young people in an emerging immigrant community, there are no reliable maps for finding one's home. The courses charted by their elders follow the contours of other times and places, while those of the host society reflect a 'social and psychic geography' (Brah 4) that is equally foreign. Negotiating the multiple and conflicting borders of 'diaspora space': 'of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of "us" and "them"' (Brah 209), these young people must find their own way of 'being-at-home' (Ahmed). For the young Somali-Australians who passed through adolescence in the first decade of this century, the intersecting spatial, socio-cultural and emotional geographies of home were particularly complex to navigate. Children of the 'foundation generation' (Nunn) of Somali refugee settlers in Australia, members of the first generation of digital natives, Muslims in a post-September 11 world, and one of the first significant cohorts of black Africans to grow up in Australia, these young people found themselves in uncharted territory.

In *Home*, a team of artists and researchers join with a group of Somali-Australian young people to chart some of the multiple, dynamic, and contested geographies of home as they imagine, understand and experience it. Reflecting the 'multiscalar' (Anderson and Taylor) nature of this terrain, the film ranges from the intimate state of being-at-home, to house and family, neighbourhood and community, the nation, and beyond, navigating the spatial, socio-cultural and emotional layers that constitute each (Mallett). A 24-minute film comprised of photographs, interviews, devised scenes and filmed visits to sites of home-making, *Home* takes the viewer on a journey into the lives of young Somali-Australians.

*Home* was created in 2008 as part of Good Starts Arts: a three-year participatory arts-based research project exploring the experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne, Australia. The project aimed to produce audio-visual materials that could both contribute to existing research on refugee background youth and be disseminated to the general public to increase awareness of the experiences of these young people, as well as to foster artistic and psychosocial competencies among participants. Good Starts Arts culminated in the production of a DVD: *4us: Young People with Refugee Backgrounds Living in Australia* (2009), featuring the four short films produced through the project. This DVD was disseminated to participants, schools, libraries, community organisations and interested institutions and individuals and has been widely used as a teaching resource.

The young people who co-created and appear in *Home* were recruited through a northern suburbs secondary school with a significant Somali-background population. The 20 participants ranged in age from 13 to 18. Many

were born in Australia, and others arrived as children. Several participants had been involved in creating a Good Starts Arts film the previous year: a short documentary entitled *See through Me: Discrimination through the eyes of ten young Somali-Australians*. Many others joined the team having viewed that film or heard about the experiences of those who participated. *See through Me's* focus on discrimination emerged out of an exploration of key issues affecting participants' lives, and reflected the social and political climate of Australia post-September 11, and in the aftermath of the 2005 ethnically-motivated Cronulla riots in Sydney. Yet while this short documentary chronicled a significant aspect of participants' experiences in Australia, the intense exploration of this negative expression of their location in the nation elicited some discomfort among participants. *Home:* provided an opportunity to engage in a more holistic and nuanced exploration of Somali-Australian experiences.

*Home:* was created over 14 sessions after school and during school holidays through a multi-faceted dialogue between Somali Australian young people, researchers and artists. Participants received basic training in photography, filmmaking, drama and interviewing, and through discussions and workshops facilitated by researchers and artists, utilised these skills to explore and represent ideas and experiences of home. The material produced by and with these young people was edited by the filmmaker, and revised and honed through a series of show-backs and discussions with participants. This participatory arts-based approach produced a dynamic, multisensory, polyvocal exploration of 'home' that challenges and complicates the fixed, univocal representations that characterise conventional research and cartography (Bruno, Conquergood, Iturrioz and Wachwicz, O'Neill and Hubbard).

As Chambers notes (92), 'the very idea of a map, with its implicit dependence upon the survey of a stable terrain, fixed referents and measurement, seems to contradict the palpable flux and fluidity of metropolitan life and cosmopolitan movement'. Film provides a more open and dynamic alternative for charting such spaces. As a multisensory medium it renders people and places audible and visible and provides access to affective and tacit domains of experience, while its polyvocality encourages the expression of multiple and conflicting ideas and experiences (Bandt, Duffy, and Mackinnon; Kirsch; Nunn; O'Neill). Moreover, as a *moving* picture, it facilitates 'site-seeing' by 'collaps[ing] time and space, mapping out diachronies and spatialities, known and unknown, for the viewer to traverse virtually.' (Bruno 275). Transcending physical geography, film also provides entrée into 'diaspora space', mapping its 'multi-axial power relations' and the 'intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location' (Brah 181) through participants' narratives, their performance of identities, their embodied and affective engagements with space, and their interactions with artists, researchers, and each other.

*Home:* is both a product and representation of the hospitality of the Somali-

Australian young people who welcomed the project artists and researchers, and through us, the audience, into their lives. Travelling with them through and between the sites in which they make their homes elicits ‘embodied, exploratory and relational experiences of space’ and facilitates the sharing of memories, narratives and emotions (O’Neill and Hubbard 50). But, as is the host’s prerogative, the access they provide is circumscribed. We are invited into some spaces, some narratives, some moments, but not others. As a result—and as with all films, all maps—the picture produced is partial and contingent (Harris 2012, Iturrioz and Wachwicz).

*Home:* is multiscalar and multi-faceted. ‘Being-at-home’ is variously oriented to place (bedroom, backyard), people (family, friends, ‘everyone that are my kind’), activities (sport, helping mother), things (phone, car, couch), sensory experiences (‘loud Somalian noises’, ‘my mum’s food sizzling’), and feelings (love, comfort, familiarity, safety). A visit to a young woman’s bedroom captures the perpetual contraction and expansion of ‘home’ as the small room opens out—through a mobile phone and laptop computer, an Islamic wall-hanging and narratives of ‘overseas’—to other spatial, emotional and socio-cultural spheres. A scene devised and performed by a group of young men struggles to express the emotional geography (Davidson and Milligan) that accompanies a father’s physical return from overseas. And Somalia is everywhere. As a perpetual alternative to and comparison for Australia, as a real and imagined homeland, and as the setting for stories and behavioural codes.

*Home:* is also a site of shifting power relations and subject positions, mediated by factors including gender, ethnicity, age and generation (Butcher). An ‘official kick-back spot’ for the older male participants—a nondescript metal bench along a secluded stretch of wall at a local shopping centre—is a rare site over which they exercise control; ‘a place where we don’t get judged’. In other *Home:* spheres authority is ceded to community elders, parents, and fellow filmmakers. But in this space, project artists, researchers and female participants hover at the margins as the young men extend their control into the film, pushing away the camera and requesting that material is edited out.

*Home:* maps the contours of the ‘diaspora space’ of Somali-Australian youth. As young people growing up in Australia in a nascent ethnic community, these young people have discovered for themselves that the borders ‘of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of “us” and “them”’ (Brah 2009), are not solid and fixed, but porous and flexible. Yet they also recognise that moving them or crossing them is not always easy: to do, or to acknowledge (Brah). Nonetheless, the young people in *Home:* resist being fixed in place. They are ‘from’ both here and there. They are at home in Australia in spite of the otherness ascribed to their skin and beliefs, and claim Somalia as their homeland despite elders’ claims they are ‘moving away’ from its culture. They are constantly on the move. In the mall, where the old Somali men gather, the boys feel safe but

they can't be themselves. Elsewhere, the reverse often applies. The girls express frustration at the limits placed on them by their gender, and at the ways this is policed in Somali community space, while in the 'Australian' spaces of their school and this film, they transgress: play fighting, posing, performing the porosity of borders between cultural constructions of gender.

*Home*, for the Somali-Australian young people who co-created this film, is located in all of these spaces; in their physical, emotional and socio-cultural geography, and in the movement between them and beyond. As members of the first generation of Somali-background youth growing up in Australia, these young people are pioneers, forging new paths and creating maps that will help guide those that follow. *Home*: both captures and constitutes this process.

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